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THE CHALLENGE TO THE CLASSICS ¹

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Mr. H. G. Wells, in his latest book, *Washington and the Riddle of Peace*, has more than one gloomy passage on the plight of Europe and America, even forecasting for New York the woe which has fallen on St. Petersburg. In one such passage the writer concludes:

As long as this divided and threatening state of affairs continues, there can be no stability, no real general recovery; shortages will increase, famine will spread; towns, cities, communications will decay; increasing masses of starving unemployed will resort to more and more desperate and violent protests, until they assume a quasi-revolutionary character. Education will ebb, and social security dwindle and fade into anarchy. Civilization as we know it will go under, and a new Dark Age begin.

Some will consider this outlook gratuitously dismal, yet for the last two or three years voices have been uplifted all about us in the same strain. To many of ourselves, I feel sure, civilization must have seemed to be hovering on the edge of an abyss, and threatening to plunge down in irremediable ruin. The staples of consumption have in many quarters ceased to correspond to the demand, and the means of production have been abridged in the face of a starving and freezing world. Indecency flaunts itself not only within doors, but on the public streets; banditry makes our highways unsafe; and murder, with all the lesser forms of violence, renders our cities, already notorious

¹ Read at the meeting of the Classical Association of New England, Wellesley College, March 31, 1922.

throughout the world for the prevalence of undetected criminals and unpunished crime, more ill-reputed than ever.

Nor are acts of depredation and outrage what is chiefly to be deplored. Such convulsive outbreaks as I have described have occurred sporadically in the whole course of history, besides those more uniform transgressions of law which are customary in every period and every race. It is the disintegration of principle, the general abandonment of standards, which, as forming the soil in which these evil deeds flourish, is most deeply fraught with danger. The pillars of the moral universe seem to be shaken, and not only do the nations of men heave and crumble under the unaccustomed strain, but the state of the individual man,

Like to a little kingdom, suffers now
The nature of an insurrection.

Meanwhile the arts, with some notable exceptions — chiefly perhaps in architecture — suffer a corresponding demoralization and degradation. In the realms which of right belong most entirely to beauty, we find displays of triviality or sheer ugliness. In a volume published within two years, verse, or what usurps the place of verse, paints the triumph of a sister-art, that of music, in a fantasia of which this is the beginning:

Drum on your drums, batter on your banjos,
Sob on the long cool winding saxophones.
Go to it, O jazzmen.

Sling your knuckles on the bottoms of the happy tin pans, let
your trombones ooze, and go husha-husha-hush with the
slippery sand-paper.

The same author, in the same volume, regales us with a composition entitled

SOUP.

I saw a famous man eating soup.
I say he was lifting a fat broth
Into his mouth with a spoon.
His name was in the newspapers that day

Spelled out in tall black headlines,
And thousands of people were talking about him.

When I saw him,
He sat bending his head over a plate,
Putting soup in his mouth with a spoon.

No wonder that Edgar Lee Masters, taking a text from the first line of the *Prometheus Bound*, is moved to this reflection upon

DESOLATE SCYTHIA.

When there are no distances in music,
No far-off things suggested of faery forests or celestial heights;
When nothing undiscovered stands back of the written page,
And the landscape contains nothing hidden,
And no alluring spirits of further places;
When no more in eyes shines the light of mystery,
And the thrill of discovered kinships
Has fallen into the familiar recognition
That takes all men and women
As daily associates of an accustomed world,
Then you have come to the uttermost plain of earth,
Where lie the rocks of desolate Scythia.

Desolate Scythia! Shall we all be content when there is no escape for us from nervous shocks save in overpowering dulness, when mere bodily motion and continual change of scene is the utmost we can hope for if we manage to attain leisure and a competence, and where we shall be condemned to hopeless monotony if we never reach that happy goal? All this is the consequence of what no one has described so well as Shakespeare, where, seeming to prophesy, he in truth delivers the oracles of history. Drawing an illustration of recognized and indisputable superiority from the relation of the sun to the planets which circle round him, he continues:

Take but degree away, untune that string,
And, hark, what discord follows! each thing meets

In mere oppugnancy : the bounded waters
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores,
And make a sop of all this solid globe ;
Strength should be lord of imbecility,
And the rude son should strike his father dead ;
Force should be right ; or rather, right and wrong,
Between whose endless jar justice resides,
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
Then every thing includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite ;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

Who shall deliver us from the body of this death? To what agencies shall we look for the redemption of a devastated world, a devastated civilization, in which the clamor of discordant tongues is heard on every side, and where burning has taken the place of beauty? Well, to me at least it is evident that various agencies, each putting forth its utmost strength, must conspire to one common end, if we are indeed to rise from the dust. The problem is economic, but it is not merely economic. It is racial, but not altogether racial. It is national, but not only national. The solution must be effected within the bosom of the individual man, and consists in the right ordering of his own nature, and the attainment of a spiritual good in the presence of which all other goods will shrink to their true relative dimensions.

It is clear that the determination of the values involved in this effort, and the communication of them to the individual, belong, in a peculiar sense, to the sphere of what we call the humanities, including in them such subjects as history, philosophy, and the cultural languages and literatures, ancient and modern. Some of us have hoped that the teaching of English literature might play a leading part in the upholding and advance of English civilization. Others have looked for powerful aid to such modern subjects as French. But the same barbarism which has progressively

sought to destroy or render impotent the teaching of Greek and Roman literature is laying its paralyzing hand upon these subjects also, so that, for example, we hear of entrance French being given up in certain of the higher institutions, on the plea that fewer and fewer secondary schools are teaching foreign languages — as if such action would not be a powerful incentive to the secondary schools to forgo such French as they still have. On the other hand, while English, if judged by the number of students who occupy themselves with it, would seem to be in a flourishing condition, it now, instead of being devoted to the masterly teaching of great, or at least significant, authors, is being made to include such topics as *Literature of the Twentieth Century*, *The Magazine in America*, *Literature of the Middle West*, and *Making a Country Newspaper* — in other words, is substituting narrowness for breadth of outlook. Greek, representing the ancient line, has been dethroned, but merely as a prelude to the abolition of all king-ships and primacies, however they are named.

What, then, is the remedy for this condition, if remedy indeed there be? The first thing, I take it, is to be convinced that there exist, within easy grasp, powers sufficient to cope with the evils under which we suffer — powers competent to transform Main Street, and, as a first essential, to transform the Main Street within ourselves from which all external Main Streets proceed, and by which they are continually renewed. Of these powers there are, I believe, two, chief over the rest, which historically have constituted, and actually do constitute, the roots of our civilization. These powers lie in the Bible, on the one hand, and, on the other, in Greek literature. The first of these, and the more important, does not concern us here and now. As to Greek, we must remind ourselves of the superiority of the Athenian, the typical Greek of our consciousness, to the men with whom we habitually consort — to ourselves, in fact. It is not sufficient to say, with Roosevelt, "The Greek literature is one of the two noblest literatures of the world, the other being the English." Here we must at least ask, To what does English literature owe its nobleness? And the answer must be, In the last analysis, and through whatever inter-

mediaries, to so much of the Bible and of Greek literature as have permeated and saturated it.

Let me illustrate this last point, in so far as it concerns Greek, from the English literature of the sixteenth century, and from writers of the reign of Henry VIII and of Elizabeth respectively. The first of these writers whom I shall adduce is Skelton, who died in 1529. Not only is Skelton's verse practically untouched by Greek, but he derided the few who were undertaking its study in his day, on the ground, forsooth, that they were unable to employ it in familiar conversation. Thus he says in *Speak, Parrot*:

But our Greeks their Greek so well have applied
That they can not say in Greek, riding by the way:
"How, hostler, fetch my horse a bottle of hay!"

Being destitute of Greek, Skelton presents his age with such effusions as this, which is the opening of his *Colin Clout*:

What can it avail
To drive forth a snail,
Or to make a sail
Of a herring's tail;
To rhyme or to rail,
To write or to indite
Either for delight
Or else for despite;
Or books to compile
Of divers manner style,
Vice to revile
And sin to exile;
To teach or to preach
As reason will reach?

With his attainments in this kind he is not fully satisfied, however; the fault is not his, but is to be ascribed to the poverty of the English language:

I am but a young maid,
And cannot in effect

My style as yet direct
With English words elect;
Our natural tongue is rude,
And hard to be ennewed
With polished terms lusty;
Our language is so rusty,
So cankered, and so full
Of frowards, and so dull,
That if I would apply
To write ornately,
I wot not where to find
Terms to serve my mind.

Hawes, a contemporary of Skelton, writing three years before the accession of Henry VIII, is not satisfied with such simple diction. He actually "applies to write ornately," with such results as this:

Her redolent wordēs, of sweet influence,
Degouted vapor most aromatic,
And made conversion of complacence;
Her depured and her lusty rhetoric
My courage reformed, that was so lunatic.

Contrast such scrannel pipings as these with the proud full sail of Spenser's verse in his *Epithalamion*, written within the same century, and the influence of Greek will be unmistakable:

Ah! when will this long weary day have end,
And lend me leave to come unto my love?
How slowly do the hours their numbers spend!
How slowly does sad Time his feathers move!
Haste thee, O fairest planet, to thy home
Within the western foam;
Thy tired steeds long since have need of rest.
Long though it be, at last I see it gloom,
And the bright evening-star, with golden crest,
Appear out of the East.
Fair child of beauty! glorious lamp of love!
That all the host of heaven in ranks dost lead,

And guidest lovers through the night's sad dread,
How cheerfully thou lookest from above,
And seem'st to laugh atween thy twinkling light.

Now let us turn back nine hundred years, to the very beginnings of English literature. Among the first pieces of poetry, considerable for length, is the epic of *Beowulf*. The more closely this has been scrutinized, the more clearly has the influence upon it of the Bible been revealed, but scarcely less so the influence of the *Aeneid*, and therefore, in a certain measure, of Greek conceptions and art. But, besides this, I have of late detected indications of what may not impossibly be a direct indebtedness of *Beowulf* to the Homeric poems. This would be in remarkable accordance with the declaration of Henry Bradley in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, that the main story of the poem is told "with a vividness of imagination, and a degree of narrative skill, that may with little exaggeration be called Homeric." But, whatever may be thought of this point, the influence of a former student at Athens, the Greek Archbishop Theodore, exerted over twenty-one years of the seventh century, could not fail to leave a deep impress upon the national character, as it certainly did upon education, and hence on the Old English literature.

At two determining epochs in English history, then — when the race was emerging from barbarism, and again upon the threshold of the Renaissance — literature began a flourishing career of centuries under the stimulus, partly direct and partly indirect, of Greek literature and Greek learning. Is it unreasonable to suggest that now, at a moment when America's spiritual activities are at so low an ebb, and when novel and appalling responsibilities are being devolved upon us by the condition of Europe, we ought eagerly to avail ourselves of an influence which has repeatedly shown itself so potent in earlier crises?

In considering this last point, the bond which unites national literature and national character should be steadily kept in mind. If we teach Greek literature, we teach more than literature; we teach ideas, principles, modes of thought and feeling. And though the Greeks were by no means blameless in certain matters of vital

consequence, we must never forget that when we are in contact with them, we are sitting at the feet of our superiors. Galton, the father of modern eugenics, said more than half a century ago: "The average ability of the Athenian race is, on the lowest possible estimate, very nearly two grades higher than our own — that is, about as much as our race is above that of the African negro." Within a hundred years, as he points out, between 530 and 430 B. C., Athens produced, of eminent statesmen and commanders, Themistocles, Miltiades, Aristides, Cimon, and Pericles; of literary and scientific men, Thucydides, Socrates, Xenophon, and Plato; of poets, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes; and, of similar rank in his art, the sculptor, Phidias. This is now the year 1922; will any one name fourteen men of equal rank whom America has produced since 1822? Now in 1820 the total population of the United States was about nine and two-thirds millions; in 1920, about a hundred and five and two-thirds millions. The current estimate of the population of Attica in the period mentioned establishes the number of free residents at about 200,000. The United States had in 1820 a free population of nearly eight millions. If our population of 1820 had remained stationary for a hundred years, it follows that, in order to sustain the comparison with Athens, we ought to have produced thirty-nine times as many men of the eminence indicated, or 546 in all. With the actual increase of population, the comparison is of course much more unfavorable to us.

Galton's exhibit is by no means flattering to our national self-esteem, but a similar conclusion is intimated by Emerson, when he says: "These iron personalities, such as in Greece and Italy, and once in England, were formed to strike fear into kings, and draw the eager service of thousands, rarely appear. . . . It seems as if two or three persons coming, who should add to a high spiritual aim great constructive energy, would carry the country with them." Emerson would have us reach up toward Grecian stature by the perusal of these authors above others — Homer, Herodotus, Aeschylus, Plato, and Plutarch.

In truth, there is every reason why we should endeavor to sur-

pass ourselves as individuals and as a nation. Samuel Daniel, a friend of Spenser's, puts into English an aphorism of Seneca's which we shall do well to lay to heart: "Unless above himself he can erect himself, how poor a thing is man!" What is the proportion of relatively superior persons in our population? A writer in the February *Atlantic*, basing her statements on our army intelligence-tests of 1917 and 1918, asserts that 47.3 per cent of our white draft would have to be classed as morons, that is, as being below the mental age of thirteen. Of average men, from fair non-commissioned officer-type to average soldier, as she expresses it, there were five and a half times as many as of superior men, while of inferior men, fit only for certain kinds of low-grade service or for dismissal from the army, there were nearly twice as many as of superior men. The percentages were: of superior men, 12 per cent; of average men, 66 per cent; and of inferior men, 22 per cent. When such a state of things exists, is not the Republic in danger?

Now who shall save and set right a nation thus constituted? Who shall think out our problems, suggest our ideals, direct our activities? We have science and skill enough to invent machines, and superintendence enough to keep wheels turning, if only we can induce operatives to operate, and secure a steady demand for the goods produced. But who shall determine how to make the life of the operative, and of all men, as interesting as possible? For this our best intellects are none too good. The task can not be assigned to the morons who constitute nearly one-half of our white population. It falls naturally and necessarily to the twelve per cent who are superior to all the rest. But by means of what exercises, and in what subjects, shall we train them? Can anything be better for this purpose than the master-works of all time, those which teach the secret of methodical and purposeful thinking, those which have been the fountain-heads of beauty and art for more than two thousand years?

A practical question here confronts us. How can the best eighth of our students be induced to commit themselves enthusiastically to the study of Latin and Greek? Only by enlisting the

popular sentiment of America in favor of such study for the peculiarly qualified. Just as the average man is in favor of medical colleges and schools of engineering, though he himself has no hope of becoming a doctor or an engineer, so he may be convinced that the statesman, the clergyman, and the journalist should acquire a species of expert knowledge which they may afterwards apply to the service of the whole community. It is, I am convinced, the most urgent task confronting the classical teachers of New England to see to it that, in their respective communities, the value and charm of ancient literature, and especially of Greek, shall be brought home, not merely to the members of the more privileged class, but to the masses of our fellow-countrymen. Let Brown, and Boston, and Bowdoin enter upon a crusade of enlightenment with respect to the danger of abandoning our priceless inheritance of wisdom. Let Wellesley, and Wesleyan, and Williams interest as many persons as they can in keeping alive in the world — in *their* world — the things by which the human spirit lives, on which it thrives and attains happiness, and without which it perishes, and sinks to the level of the beast. What an achievement it would be if every school where Latin and Greek are taught were to educate the citizenry of their respective localities to the conviction that at least the leading minds of America should be conversant, in the interests of the Republic, with the best that has been thought out and wrought out by the most civilized nations of antiquity, those from which all our civilization has flowed! If the people at large can not be convinced that the teaching of the classics is necessary to the very existence of America as one of the foremost nations of the globe, and equally indispensable to their own greatest personal happiness, the outlook for our country, and no less for the world, is sorry indeed.